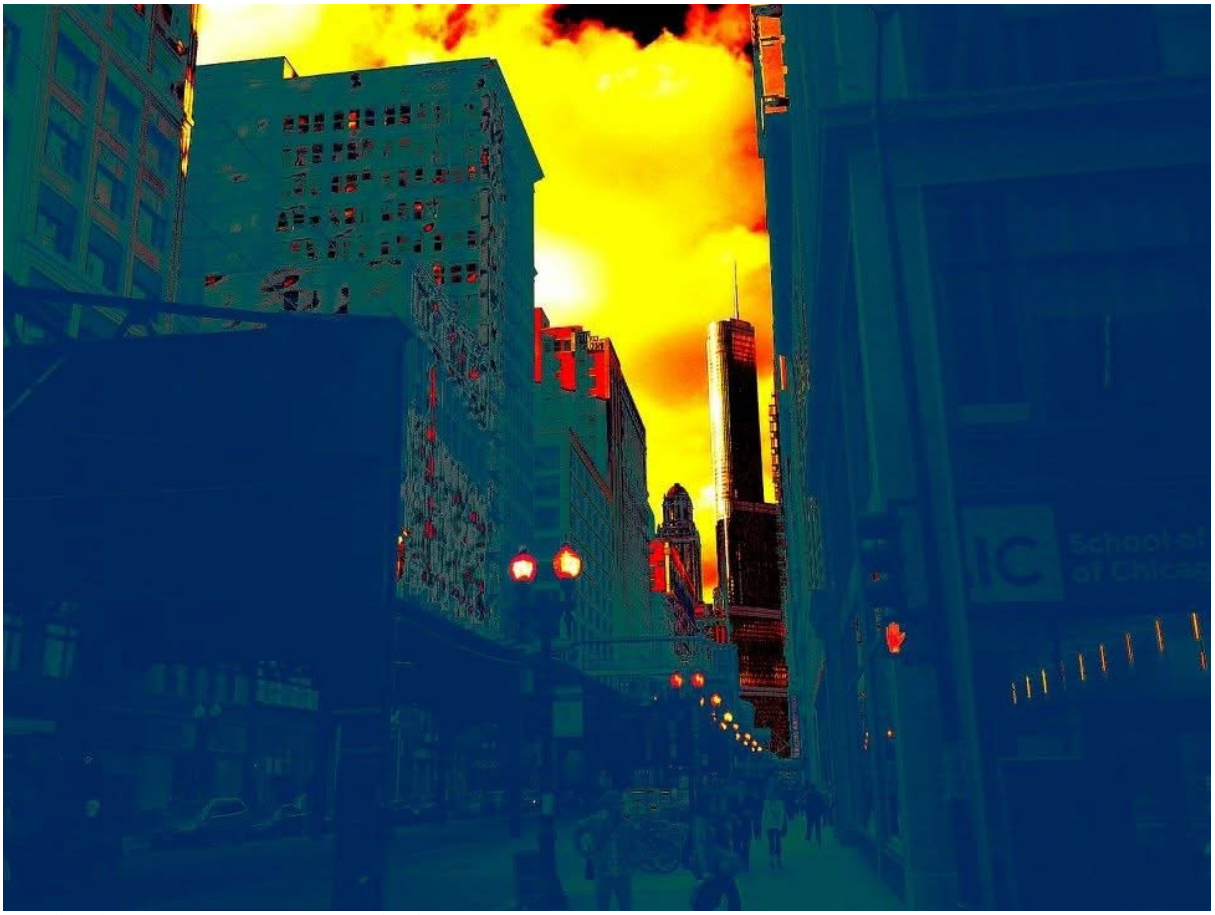

Wabash Canyon, 2013, KC Clarke

The Third Dystopia

Billy Idol, AI, and the Machinery of Moral Outrage

This essay is contaminated. I used an AI system while thinking through it. I used it as a pressure chamber, a research assistant, a patient interlocutor, a graduate seminar that did not get tired, a surface against which my own argument could strike and return with clearer edges. The ideas are mine. The responsibility is mine. The irritation is certainly mine. But the process was touched by a tool.

That is supposed to be the scandal, but I am less convinced. Writing has always been contaminated by whatever helps thought come into form: libraries, teachers, editors, enemies, conversations, records, films, typewriters, word processors, search engines, archives, old arguments, bad reviews, stray remarks, and the machinery available at the time. The fantasy of untouched authorship is mostly a fantasy of forgetting the apparatus.

Orwell understood one form of modern captivity. Huxley understood another. Orwell imagined a world in which power watches, coerces, rewrites, and commands. His great

symbols remain familiar because they keep returning in altered forms: the telescreen, the memory hole, Newspeak, doublethink, the ritualized hatred of the Two Minutes Hate. Orwell's nightmare was the enforced instability of truth. What happened yesterday could be revised by power today. A citizen could be trained to accept contradiction because authority required it.

Huxley saw a different cage. He imagined a civilization softened into obedience by pleasure, appetite, sex, drugs, entertainment, consumption, and voluntary triviality. In Huxley, people can be made obedient through comfort, distraction, and sedation. The prison smiles. The drug works. The appetite keeps reproducing itself.

Orwell's screen watches through algorithm. Huxley's screen pleases through endless distraction. More than anything, ours agitates, and this is the third dystopia.

The third dystopia borrows from both and belongs fully to neither. Its force is moral agitation without memory. It is crowd-powered, but it begins inside the individual. The citizen becomes a little state, policing language, revising memory, enforcing contradiction, condemning impurity, and absolving himself through accusation. The addict becomes his own pharmacist. The narcotic is certainty.

New technologies give this cycle fresh objects. A record, a tool, a book, a machine, a platform, a style, a sentence, a method: each can become the next corruption. The artist meets this early because the artist keeps testing the difference between living presence and public alignment. I name the third dystopia for the artist first because by the time the verdict arrives, the artist has usually been living inside the accusation for some time.

The third dystopia reaches almost everything: where people live, how people speak, eat, buy, read, refuse, belong, grieve, signal, condemn, and remain silent. It governs what one is allowed to complicate. Outrage creates temporary moral worlds, each with commandments, villains, taboos, and required gestures. While the outrage lasts, its rules feel eternal. Then the next outrage arrives and the old commandments disappear. There is rarely apology, correction, or memory. Every outrage arrives as gospel, leaves as weather, and returns as a new law under another name.

Conviction has memory because it can revise itself, explain itself, accept responsibility, apologize, return to the problem, and remain answerable over time. Outrage gives people the feeling of moral seriousness without requiring the discipline of moral memory. To enter the outrage is to receive a temporary office. One may condemn, sort, correct, accuse, and enforce. One may know the rule before understanding the subject.

Then outrage makes people afraid because the badge can be revoked. The next outrage may judge the last outrage. The phrase that once proved alignment may later become evidence. The post remains after the moral world that produced it has vanished. Orwell imagined a memory hole that erased the past. The third dystopia produces people with no moral memory living inside machines that remember everything.

Hysteria is bad at mediation because it wants the shortest route from contact to accusation. It struggles to distinguish inspiration from theft, transformation from appropriation, tool from author, use from replacement, concept from gimmick, access from corruption, transition from fraud.

Billy Idol's 1993 album Cyberpunk was an early case of the third dystopia forming around digital culture. The usual story is easy: Billy Idol, already a major MTV rock star, made a cyberpunk concept album. It was mocked. The cyberpunks thought he was a tourist. Critics treated the project as ridiculous. The album became a shorthand for failed futurism, celebrity overreach, and digital embarrassment. The CDs went quickly to the bargain bins. The joke hardened because the verdict traveled faster than the record. But Idol belonged to the future he was accused of trespassing.

He came out of the early punk world in England. Punk's first ethic was permission. Cheap instruments, homemade clothes and flyers, basements, new clubs made just for punk, attitude, nerve. Use whatever you have and make the thing. That was the original energy before the priests arrived with rules about who counted.

Idol carried that energy into America and then into MTV. MTV was a new machine for turning music into image and image into reach. Everyone wanted on MTV. Idol used it better than most, becoming one of the faces of the video age. He kept saying yes to new machinery. First punk. Then MTV. Then the computer-based home studio, wired into the early internet.

By the time of *Cyberpunk*, Idol was trying to survive a transition. The rock-and-roll life had become its own Huxley condition: drugs, appetite, sex-symbol branding, excess, spectacle, and the pleasure machine that had nearly killed him. The motorcycle accident had damaged his body. The drug life had damaged his life. The old version of Billy Idol had become both product and trap.

By the time of *Cyberpunk*, Idol was a punk-origin artist trying to get out from under the life that might have destroyed him: injured, overexposed, branded as a sex-symbol rock star, working at home with computer-based tools, building a concept album around technology, riot, media, body, rebellion, and the fictional lineage of cyberpunk. I have no need to rescue *Cyberpunk* from every charge ever made against it. Maybe it is ridiculous in places. Maybe it overreaches. Good. Artists are allowed to overreach. Some of the best things in art arrive with too much appetite and too much wrong future in them.

Idol was making a garage record before laptop culture had given the act a respectable name. He was dragging a damaged rock-and-roll body into a garage with computers, cyberpunk fiction, riot footage, home recording, network culture, and whatever nerve he had left. Of course the record sounded different. It came from a different room. And the record has songs: strange songs, huge songs, songs unlike the Billy Idol people had seen on stages, heard on records, watched on MTV, and carried around in their heads. The move was pure punk: use the tools, make the thing, do it yourself. But a star of Idol's

size was no longer supposed to work that way. He was supposed to arrive through the approved machinery, not drag the machinery into the garage and wire it himself.

The culture called that embarrassment. It looks more interesting now: a major rock star grabbing the new tools with both hands and a snarl before everyone else caught on. Idol tried to escape one machine and got caught in another.

The self-appointed futurists responded like village elders. The people whose imagined world should have been porous, hybrid, technological, suspicious of authority, and open to machine-body mutation suddenly discovered borders. Idol entered as a punk translated by American machinery: MTV, tabloids, beauty, danger, drugs, rock-and-roll appetite. He had come from a punk world more physically violent than the internet cyberpunks could imagine, but the translated version was all they could see. They thought they were rejecting commercialization while standing at the edge of a machine that would commercialize everything. The wrong version of the right person had touched the future. The old audience wanted the brand. The new priests wanted the border.

There is an additional irony in the rock lineage. Bowie had already transformed dystopian fiction into rock mythology. *Diamond Dogs* grew partly from his failed attempt to adapt Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, then mutated into its own apocalyptic world. Bowie also had "Rebel Rebel," and the commercial difference is plain. A hit gives the strange thing a door. *Cyberpunk* had no such door. It had uprising, a cyborg body, computers, home recording, media violence, and a fame the cyberpunk world already mistrusted. The broader culture saw the computers and treated the experiment as contamination, much as AI is treated now. "Shock to the System" carried the added charge of appropriation, drawing from an uprising against police violence and pushing that uprising through cyberpunk imagery. Underneath all of it, Idol himself was trying to move, using punk method at rock-star scale while trying to survive the machine that had made him. The work was caught in the third dystopia before anyone knew its name.

The internet as it then existed was already training itself in purity outrage, and cyberpunk gave it an early subject. The scale was smaller, the machinery primitive, the audience narrower, but the behavior was taking shape: quick sorting, subcultural border patrol, authenticity tests, contamination charges, appropriation claims, pile-on ridicule, and the pleasure of making the wrong person ridiculous. Boundary policing was not invented by the platforms that now dominate public life.

But the third dystopia has an old irony inside it: panic advertises what it condemns. It points, labels, repeats, circulates, and makes the forbidden object easier to find. The PMRC understood itself as a warning system, but it also became a publicity machine. Tipper Gore and the PMRC did not bury punk, metal, or obscene records. They often gave them a label that functioned like a dare. Dead Kennedys did not vanish under censorship pressure; they became evidence of the panic that tried to contain them.

The work can outlive the organism that made it. The Sex Pistols did not survive as a stable organism. Generation X, Idol's own band, did not survive. Dead Kennedys did not survive. Bands fracture for many reasons: money, law, ego, exhaustion, internal pressure, industry friction, ordinary human limits. The work was placed, and some of it lasted. The brand can die. The maker can move. The work, once placed, can travel on its own.

Jello Biafra's continued presence is not nostalgia. He did not need to preserve the old band to remain an artist. He stayed an artist by moving, not by repeating. Continuity lives in the practice, not only in the brand.

That standard carries into the current literary panic over AI. Many of the concerns are real. Copyright theft is real. Style laundering is real. Synthetic books, fake authors, platform flooding, and fraudulent attribution are real. But the claim that machines are suddenly threatening human labor is ahistorical nonsense. The machine age has done little else but replace, reorganize, cheapen, extend, and multiply human labor through tools. American labor was already hollowed out by automation, offshoring, union collapse, corporate consolidation, and decades of treating workers as costs to be reduced. Now the panic wants to place the whole burden on AI, as if the tool invented the appetite. It did not.

The question is not whether machines touch the work. They already do. They have for generations. The question is who is using the tool, toward what end, under what conditions, and with what responsibility. Editorial judgment, design craft, illustration, translation, writing, production skill, and artistic practice are not interchangeable. They can be damaged by markets, platforms, publishers, and institutions eager to confuse output with art. The problem is not the tool. The problem is the appetite that wants the work without the worker.

"AI touched it" is not a thought. It is a sorting reflex, a way to stop reading at the moment of contact and call that stopping moral judgment. The harder questions begin where purity quits: what did the tool do, what did it replace, what did it make possible, who remained accountable, who made the choices, who carried the risk, whether it stole a style, laundered labor, erased accountability, created a counterfeit author, flooded the field, or turned the artist into raw material while pretending to empower the artist. Purity wants contamination to be the whole story because contamination is easy to identify and easier to condemn. Ethics cares enough to ask what happened.

The culture did not spend the last several decades organizing itself around reverence for the human soul. It organized itself around speed, output, efficiency, scale, branding, metrics, replacement, and content. Then AI arrived, mimicking fluency well enough to embarrass the system that had already cheapened fluency, and suddenly everyone wanted to defend the sacred human center. The offense was not only that the machine had no soul. The deeper offense was that it exposed how little soul the surrounding machinery had been asking from us.

AI arrived after a long history of digital contamination. The web was already a copying machine, an indexing machine, a piracy machine, a remix machine, a memory machine, and an erasure machine. The models changed the scale. Scale changes the crime. The sudden performance of innocence around the internet is hard to take seriously. The third dystopia needs every new object to feel like the first corruption. Outrage without memory always discovers innocence just in time to mourn it. The answer is trace the theft.

Panic mistakes scale for attention. Most independent artists are in danger of being ignored. The ordinary fate of the small book, the small album, the small poem, the small essay, is disappearance.

Extraction changes the moral geometry. A working artist using a compromised tool to make an encounter possible occupies one moral scale. A corporation using artists as raw material to replace them occupies another. The third dystopia collapses these scales into one moral object: the corporation training at massive scale, the platform flooding with slop, the executive selling a god-machine, the student cheating, the designer cutting corners, the working poet using a model as a thinking tool. Everything becomes the same crime because everything touched the same word. That is not ethics; that is moral compression.

The panic also gives the companies a gift. It makes the machine sound more powerful than it is. AI is a powerful tool, but the myth turns the tool into a god. Every frightened prophecy, every alien-possession story, every claim that the machine is coming for the human soul gives the sellers what they could never buy outright: awe.

The indie author world should understand this better than almost anyone. Indie publishing exists because tools escaped the gatekeepers: word processors, desktop publishing, digital design, print-on-demand, ebooks, metadata, newsletters, social platforms, online reviews, direct sales, PDFs, search, templates, and other mechanisms that once would have looked illegitimate to an older apparatus. The indie writer who condemns AI on purity grounds may be standing on a mountain of tools previous gatekeepers considered corrupting.

Opposition to modern tools can become anti-artist when it protects an idea of purity over the actual conditions of making. The question is not whether the tool is modern, suspect, compromised, or new enough to frighten the room. The question is whether the artist remains present, accountable, and at risk inside the work.

At that point the disclosure demand becomes farce. One may as well announce that the work was made with a computer rather than a typewriter, with search rather than a card catalog, with layout software rather than hot metal, with digital files rather than paper drafts. Tool contact is not authorship. Tool contact is not fraud.

Purity is not poetry.

Poetry makes this problem especially strange. Poetry is nearly free to make and nearly impossible to sell. The poem itself is accessible to anyone with language; the field around it is narrow, underfunded, status-driven, and often structurally inhospitable. There is little money, little distribution, little audience, and very little ordinary exchange. You cannot sell poems like eggs at the roadside. So the small apparatus that does exist becomes overcharged with permission, taste, affiliation, scarcity, and recognition. The art is accessible, and the apparatus is often not.

Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics was statistically unlikely to exist through normal channels: a thirty-year poetry manuscript, forty-eight poems, a full companion poetics, poem-by-poem architecture, musical structure, civic poetics, a law of moral recursion, AI disclosed as pressure chamber rather than author, no easy genre, no obvious market shelf, no author photo, no conventional biographical sales posture, no invitation to consume the poet as the explanation for the poems.

It was also unlikely because I was not supposed to have the time. Work, family, deadlines, fatigue, obligation, and the daily machinery of keeping things moving had already claimed the hours. For years the poems sat where poems sit: in folders, in files, in memory, in the addition of a new poem, in occasional revision, in the strange guilt of unfinished attention. I would add to them again and wonder what I was supposed to do with them. What is anyone supposed to do with poems?

The desire to do something? was already there. The tool gave *that something* friction by reading deeply enough that I could begin to see the poems as a project rather than individual pieces of art I had been making over decades. Maybe that depth of reading is exactly what frightens people. Fine. It also made something possible that the usual apparatus almost certainly would not have made possible in the form I needed it to take: a collection of poems and a companion poetics, held together as one object. The poems had no gallery to go to, so I used the tool to build one, then built the literary criticism and civic poetics needed to frame them.

The machine arrived after the practice. I had already been doing the work for years: radio copy, video scripts, podcast scripts, television scripts, ads, broadsides, posters, brochures, covers, websites, institutional materials, public-facing literary objects, and books. I learned copyediting and layout because books needed to exist and the money was not always there. *Wolves and Flax: The Prior Family in the Cuyahoga Valley Wilderness* was the first book I laid out myself. *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics* was the second.

Professional designers, editors, and layout people do serious work. I have worked beside them for years. I know what they can do. I also know what they cost, and they should cost that. A poetry book almost never generates the money required to hire a full professional production team, and this book, especially in its true form, was not built for easy passage through the usual publishing machinery.

The machine gathered old skills under pressure. It gave speed, memory, and structure to capacities I already had, and the longer I used it, the more human history it required from me. Every time the argument flattened, I had to correct it with lived fact. The machine did not erase the artist. It made the artist more accountable to the work.

That is why the contamination charge is lazy. It sees the tool and erases the decades of human practice that made the tool useful in the first place. I could let the poems, ideas, and history around them sit, or I could use the machine to make the book. I made a professional-grade book in my garage because the tools finally reached the garage.

A drawer needs almost nothing. The world requires tools. A poem in a drawer has one kind of purity. A poem placed in the world has another kind of risk.

The book may be ignored. It may be misread. It may fail commercially. It may outlast the outrage that made it seem suspect. It may not. The artist cannot know. The artist can only make the thing, place it, and remain answerable. The statistically impossible book exists.

The present mood has no special authority. The rules of today are not the rules of the future. In the third dystopia, they may not even be the rules of next week. A thing that looks contaminated inside one outrage cycle may look honest in another. A thing that cannot be priced now may become legible later, or may remain marginal forever. The artist makes beyond the jurisdiction of temporary moral worlds.

Fuck purity.

Theft, slop, fraud, fake authors, laundered style, and machines trained to make human artists disappear deserve contempt. The artist remains the source, the judge, the risk, and the one who answers. The machine does not get to replace the artist. The priesthood does not get to invalidate the artist because the artist used a forbidden tool.

This is why *Cyberpunk* deserves release from the dumbest version of its verdict. All these years later, one can listen to it and wonder what the outrage was protecting. The record is obviously a concept album. It is obviously rooted in cyberpunk fiction and digital unease. It is obviously tied to home recording, new tools, damaged bodies, media violence, and self-reinvention. It is also obviously strange. Good. Artists are allowed to be strange. They are allowed to fail interestingly. They are allowed to reach for something before the culture has learned how to receive it.

Idol kept choosing the machine, and the culture kept punishing the choice. The crowd cooked the artist for a while, mistook the heat for judgment, and moved on to the next charge. The record remained.

The band can end. The institution can fall away. The scene can close ranks. The brand can die. The publishing machinery can ignore what it cannot explain. The outrage can

move on to its next temporary moral world. The artist is the part that does not leave when the institution does.

So I used the tools that reached the garage. I made the object whole. The poems are human. The judgment is human. The risk is human. The machine did not replace the artist. It helped place the work.

Artist first. The rest is priesthood.

About the Author: KC Clarke is the author of *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* & *The Groaning Book: A Poetics*, and of *Wolves and Flax: The Prior Family in the Cuyahoga Valley Wilderness*. His professional life has included leadership in literary centers, museums, libraries, and nonprofit institutions, as well as editorial and creative direction for numerous books. He writes from within the civic and cultural infrastructure this essay describes.